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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 001149

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES PUSH ELECTORAL PROCESS REFORMS

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, Reason(s): 1.4 d

1. (SBU) On March 15, the Awami League (AL) and its opposition partners held a roundtable seminar on "Democracy and Election: necessity of reforming the caretaker government system" to promote "reforms" to guarantee free and fair elections. Participants argued for a consensus "non-partisan" head for caretaker governments first used in 1991 to provide impartial administration during an election period, and argued against the current system of designating as caretaker head the immediate past chief justice. Critics charged that the BDG has amended and manipulated the process to ensure that an openly pro-BNP person will lead the next caretaker government.

2. (SBU) Other proposed changes included ensuring a financially independent Election Commission with the authority to pick its own staff, preventing the caretaker government from issuing ordinances before the election, and preventing loan defaulters and extremist religious parties from contesting the elections. Participants formed an all-party committee to develop concrete proposals by May 15.

3. (C) When asked how such proposals could be enacted into law, AL Organizing Secretary Ahktar Ahktaruzzaman said only, "Hopefully, the proposals would be put into effect by the will of the people." He noted that the BNP government has refused to accept any changes in the electoral process and cited as worrisome its recent refusal of electoral assistance from a foreign donor. Ahktaruzzaman said that the AL had no immediate plan to submit legislation or constitutional changes but that this would come after concrete proposals are published.

4. (C) Comment: AL leaders know there is virtually no way the BDG would accept caretaker or other major electoral "reforms." Instead, their aim is to project the BDG as corrupt and undemocratic and thereby lay the groundwork for a possible boycott of the next general election. AL leaders privately threaten a boycott if the BDG leaves it with "no choice," but political pressures within the AL and elsewhere against a boycott without a supportive mass movement would be huge.

THOMAS